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ABSTRACT

A recent study (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1970) showed that fourth graders from an upper middle class background with varying degrees of intelligence, creativity, and language achievement could be taught to express themselves poetically. The present study was undertaken to replicate these results with children from less advantaged backgrounds. The two alternative experimental programs for poetry writing developed for the initial study were used. Comparison of these results indicate that the methodologies employed are equally effective with both socio-economic groups. The effect of intelligence, creativity, and language achievement differs to some extent; the implications of both the similarities and differences are explored. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (Author)

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An Evaluation of Poetry Lessons With Children
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Although educators have long been in general agreement as to the great value of poetry for elementary school children, the research in this area had tended, with a few exceptions such as Gillett (1934), Torrance (1955), and Shapiro & Shapiro (1970), to be anecdotal in nature. The Shapiro & Shapiro (1970) study showed that grade four children from an upper middle class background but with varying degrees of intelligence, creativity, and language achievement could be taught to express themselves poetically. The present study was undertaken in an attempt to replicate these results with children from less advantaged backgrounds.

The Experimental Methodologies

Two alternative experimental programs for poetry writing were used. These programs were developed for a previous study and are fully described elsewhere (Shapiro, 1969; Shapiro & Shapiro 1970). Briefly, both the 'free' and the 'semi-structured' approaches (a) consisted of fifteen half-hour lessons to be given three times a week for five weeks, (b) provided six occasions during the five weeks for the children to write original poems, and (c) were organized around the themes of unity, choice of words, rhythm, imagery, and affective quality; elements considered essential in a good poem (Walter, 1962).

The method used in the 'free' lessons was to encourage poetry writing by exposing the children to poems by well known poets, and listening was the central activity involved. Although the children were free to comment as and if they wished after the reading of each poem, the teacher was instructed not to force these issues, and no specific arrangements were made for group work. By contrast, the 'semi-structured' lessons consisted of a sequence of carefully planned group and individual activities designed to (a) increase children's facility with words, (b) help children express their ideas in new ways, and (c) lead the children to think of questions related to the quality of good poetry. Despite this strong structural thread, the lessons are labeled 'semi-structured' in that an attempt is made to use the device of multiple grouping within the class to provide the children with opportunities for self-expression and the interaction available in small group brainstorming and the sharing of original ideas. Far less poetry was actually read than in the 'free' lessons, but the poems did include these written by children as well as adults.

The Subject Sample

The study took place in a metropolitan school system. The experimental subjects were the pupils in two grade four and two grade five classes, whose teachers had volunteered to participate. The youngsters were from working class backgrounds as defined by Mayer (1955). That is, the majority of their parents were skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled manual workers. Within each grade level classes were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment groups. Of the 87 children, 40 (18 boys, 22 girls) received the 'free' program, while 47 (21 boys, 26 girls) received the 'semi-structured' lessons.

The Measurement Instruments

A special rating scale, previously developed by the investigators (Crossley, Shapiro & Shapiro, 1969), was used to evaluate the effect of the lessons on the subjects' ability to write poetry. The rating form provided for an independent rating along a four point scale for each of the five dimensions (i.e., unity, choice of words, rhythm, imagery, and affective quality) assessed, and a twenty-point overall rating was derived by summing across the five sub-scales. Both a pretest and a posttest poem were collected, and three raters (all of whom were English majors and elementary school teachers) rated all the poems. The average of the three ratings was used, and the inter-judge reliability of the overall rating was $+ .89$.

Three additional independent variables were introduced as appropriate pretest measures. These were (a) intelligence, measured by the Pintner-Durest Elementary Test (Pintner et al, 1941), (b) language achievement, measured by the word knowledge sub-test of the elementary and intermediate battery of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests, Form A (Durest et al, 1960) and (c) creativity, measured by the Unusual Uses sub-scale from the verbal battery of the Torrance (1966) Tests of Creative Thinking, Form A.

Research Questions

The general hypothesis to be tested was that there was no difference between the 'free' and the 'semi-structured' methods in terms of their effect on the poetry writing of fourth and fifth graders from less-advantaged backgrounds. Specifically, the following three questions were asked:

- (1) For each of the treatment groups, was there any statistically significant difference between their pretest and posttest poetry ratings?
- (2) As measured by the poetry rating scale, was there any statistically significant difference between the effect of the 'free' and the 'semi-structured' lessons?
- (3) What was the relationship of the treatment effects to other independent variables such as sex, intelligence, language achievement, and creativity?

The Findings

The pre and the posttest means and standard deviations for each of the experimental groups are presented in Table 1. These data revealed

Table 1 about here

the lack of pre-experimental sampling equality of the groups resulting at least partly from the fact that whole classes rather than individual students were randomly assigned. However, the group differences are not all in the same direction; thus, for example, the 'semi-structured' group surpassed the 'free' group in terms of pre-poem ratings, but the reverse was true for measured creativity.

As can be seen from the data in Table 1, both of the experimental treatments resulted in improvements in the children's ability to write original poems. On the twenty-point overall rating scale, the mean gains were 10.33 and 8.63 for the 'semi-structured' and 'free' groups respectively. F tests between correlated means indicated that for both the 'semi-structured' group ($F_{1,46}=187.77$) and the 'free' group ($F_{1,39}=145.73$), these gains were statistically significant at the one per cent level.

In considering the comparative effect of the two treatments, the previously mentioned lack of pre-experimental sampling equality had to be considered. Therefore, the analysis of covariance was used with the posttest poem rating as the criterion and the pretest poem rating, IQ, language achievement, and creativity scores as the covariates. The unadjusted criterion and covariate means are given in Table 1, above, while the adjusted criterion means and results of the covariance analysis are presented in Table 2. These data revealed

Table 2 about here

that in terms of the children's ability to write poetry, although, as outlined above, both methodologies resulted in statistically significant improvement, the 'semi-structured' lessons appear to have been more effective than the 'free' lesson approach.

In order to analyze the effects of the other independent variables (i.e., sex, intelligence, language achievement, and creativity), two 3-way (2x2x2) analyses of covariance were done, both using the posttest poem rating as the dependent variable.

The first of these analyses considered differences between treatment groups, sex groups, and two levels of pre-experimental language achievement (defined in terms of the mean score of the total sample) and using the pretest poem rating, IQ, and creativity as covariates. The adjusted criterion means for the main effects are presented in Table 3 and the results of the general covariance analysis are given in Table 4.

Tables 3 & 4 about here

As expected from the previous analyses, the present analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the two treatment groups. However, when adequate covariance adjustments were made, there were no statistically significant differences between (a) males and females, and (b) groups defined in terms of their level of pre-experimental language achievement. There were no significant two-way interactions, but the three-way interaction (i.e., between treatment, sex, and language achievement) was statistically significant. Examination of the cell means indicated that the interaction was caused by the relatively greater difference between high and low language achievement girls in the control groups (6 points) as compared to the experimental group (2 points).

The second of the factorial analyses considered differences between treatment groups, two levels of creativity, and two levels of IQ - the 'high' and 'low' levels of IQ and creativity being defined in terms of the mean score of the total sample. The pretest poem rating and language achievement were used as the covariates. The adjusted criterion means for the main effects are presented in Table 5, and the results for the general covariance analysis are given in Table 6.

Tables 5 & 6 about here

In addition to the expected difference between the treatment groups, the present analysis yielded a statistically significant difference between IQ groups, the 'high' IQ group out-performing the 'low' (cf. Table 5). There were no statistically significant differences between the creativity groups, and no statistically significant interactions were noted.

Conclusion

It would appear that within the design limitations of this study, fourth and fifth grade children from lower class backgrounds can be taught to express themselves poetically. Further, this possibility seems to exist not only for the bright, the creative, or the high achieving, but also for those lower in IQ, language achievement, and creativity whose mean gains in the present study were 8.7, 9.0, and 8.9 respectively.

Comparison of these results with those from the investigators' earlier study done with upper middle class children (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1970) indicate that each of the methodologies employed are effective with both socio-economic groups. In both cases and along the same 20-point scale, the 'semi-structured' treatment resulted in a mean gain of 10 points, going from a pretest level of 5 to a posttest level of 15. Similarly, the mean gain for the 'free' group was approximately seven points for both the upper middle and the lower class groups.

In terms of the additional independent variables studied, only language achievement appeared to have no significant effect for both socio-economic groups. IQ appeared to be important only in the present study (i.e., for the lower SES group) while creativity exercised effects only in the original study (e.e., with the higher SES group). These asymmetrical effects need to be further investigated. One possible hypothesis is that since across all groups initial poems are unsuccessful, longer treatment periods will yield more stable results in relationship to these particular variables.

It should be emphasized that although the analyses indicated the relative superiority of the 'semi-structured' method, both methodologies produced a statistically significant improvement in the children's ability to write poetry. Thus, there is more than one way to achieve this goal. It is possible that the relative merits of the two approaches might change when additional independent variables (e.g., teacher effects) or dependent variables (e.g., attitudes) are studied.

In the investigators' previous study (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1970), a number of issues were suggested for future investigation, among which was the relative effects of the poetry lessons on children from less advantaged backgrounds. Other issues raised then and remaining to be addressed are:

- (1) the effect of the lessons on other dependent variables such as the writing of prose and attitude toward literary expression;
- (2) the use of a single overall rating in assessing each poem; since the intercorrelations of the five sub-scales used in the present study were all above +.90, a single general rating may serve equally well;
- (3) the possible improvement in the obtained data resulting from more adequate methods for approaching the sub-scale dimensions; in the present study, each rater evaluated a given poem along all five dimensions before proceeding to the next poem; perhaps rating all poems along each dimension before proceeding to the next dimension might yield more independent sub-scales and, thus, greater information.

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Table 1
Pretest and Posttest Means

Measure	'Semi-structured' (N=47)	Group	'Free' (N=40)
Pretests			
IQ	111.15 (13.63)*		112.75 (12.10)
Language Achievement- Grade Score	5.23 (1.28)		5.29 (1.56)
Creativity	23.32 (13.43)		27.68 (14.56)
Poetry Rating	5.27 (5.03)		2.31 (3.96)
Posttest			
Poetry Rating	15.60 (2.94)		10.94 (4.04)

*Figures in parentheses are the standard deviations

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Table 2

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Poems Adjusted Means
(Unadjusted Means in Parentheses)

'Semi-structured' (N=47)	Group 'Free' (N=40)	Difference	F _{1,81}
15.57 (15.60)	10.53 (10.94)	5.04	40.34**

**statistically significant at the one per cent level

Table 3

Posttest Poem, Adjusted Means*

Grouping	N	Mean
Treatment Groups		
'Semi-structured'	47	15.51
'Free'	40	10.80
Sex Groups		
Males	39	13.48
Females	48	12.84
Language Achievement		
'High'**	43	13.69
'Low'	44	12.62

*Adjusted for pre-experimental differences in pretest poem rating, IQ and creativity

**Defined as subjects at or above the total sample mean of 5.26

Table 4

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Poem Ratings
(Adjusted for Pretest Poem Ratings, IQ
and Creativity)

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatments (A)	1	34878.94	33.48**
Sex (B)	1	319.00	.31
Language Achievement (C)	1	2184.00	2.10
AB	1	132.63	.13
AC	1	635.25	.61
BC	1	793.69	.76
ABC	1	4316.00	4.14*
Error	76	1041.72	

*Statistically significant at the five per cent level

**Statistically significant at the one per cent level

Table 5
Posttest Poem Adjusted Means*

Grouping	N	Mean
Treatment Groups		
'Semi-structured'	47	15.70
'Free'	40	11.15
IQ Groups		
'High'**	42	14.10
'Low'	45	12.75
Creativity Groups		
'High'***	41	13.93
'Low'	46	12.92

*Adjusted for pre-experimental differences in pretest poem ratings and language achievement

**Defined as subjects at or above the total sample mean of 112.07

***Defined as subjects at or above the total sample mean of 25.32

Table 6

Analysis of Covariance: Posttest Poem Ratings
(Adjusted for Pretest Poem Ratings, and
Language Achievement)

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Treatments (A)	1	35026.19	34.41**
IQ (B)	1	4731.94	4.65*
Creativity	1	2076.36	2.04
AB	1	485.44	.47
AC	1	3279.94	3.22
BC	1	1167.38	1.14
ABC	1	47.69	.05
Error	77	1017.79	

*Statistically significant at the five per cent level

**Statistically significant at the one per cent level